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# National Museum Act Program (1973-1974): Speech 03

Charles E. Buckley

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A Statement  
Before the Special Sub-Committee on Arts and Humanities  
of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare  
Thursday, July 19, 1973 by

CHARLES E. BUCKLEY

President, American Association of Museums  
Director, The St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri

Mr. Chairman and members of the special Sub-Committee on Arts and Humanities of the Senate, I am testifying today on behalf of The American Association of Museums, which has a substantial institutional and individual membership throughout the country and has its headquarters in Washington, D.C. I also speak as the Director of a large mid-western art museum which annually welcomes well above 500,000 visitors and plays a most important role in the cultural life of our region.

Before preparing today's statement in regard to the Museum Services Act (S. 796) I reviewed my testimony given on September 19, 1972 before Congressman Brademas' Select Sub-Committee on Education on the same act (H.R. 8677). After reading it, as well as reading the testimony given on that same day by my colleagues, I feel that my position before this Committee today is essentially the same.

At that time I said that I thought the Museum Services Act was "admirably broad the way it was written," and that it took into account some of the most basic needs of museums, especially in regard to the emphasis it placed on renovation and development of museum facilities. From my experience the question of proper facilities in which to conduct our operations has always loomed large, but never larger than it does now. My entire personal experience in the museum field, like that of many of my colleagues, has been one of attempting to do a maximum job for the benefit of the public under conditions which were far from being even halfway satisfactory.

Not all American museums are rundown and delapidated, though it would be difficult to deny that many of them stand in dire need of major renovation if they are not only to develop beyond the point they have now reached, but even to maintain their present position. Museum people are traditionally good housekeepers and they strive to put their best foot forward so that the public will see our institutions as inviting and attractive places where at their leisure they will have the opportunity to broaden their knowledge through an informal contact with scientific, historical and artistic exhibits of many different kinds. I suppose most of us tend to be "house

proud" and we have been inclined over the years to shy away from letting our visitors know just how hard a time we have had in keeping body and soul together. Nevertheless, beyond the exhibition galleries of even some of our finest museums the facilities on which the whole public thrust of those institutions rests leave much to be desired. I refer to facilities in broad terms, such as storage areas in order to give proper protection to collections which for various reasons might not always be on public view, but which are nonetheless of vital importance to the work of any institution, to mechanical systems of all kinds, to conservation laboratories, to work areas where so much activity goes on prior to exhibitions, and in connection with keeping a building functioning on all levels to take care of our enormous public, to libraries which, regardless of size, are vital to the functions of a museum. I refer no less to facilities such as rest areas for the public, spaces in which to conduct educational activities, mechanical services such as elevators, the introduction of ramps and other conveniences for the handicapped, aged and the infirm.

Thus the word "facilities" covers a great deal of territory and I am sure that any one of my colleagues here today could lengthen this list. Much of what I am talking about has to do with older buildings which, though they may appear to be in basically good condition, require often costly renovation.

and updating if they are to serve the public in a proper manner. It seems ironical to me that those well-known, privately operated, and enormously popular entertainment areas in this country - such as public amusement parks - that lay claim to presenting history in an easily digestible form, even though it may be entirely plastic, should be so superbly staffed and operated owing to the profits they generate while our museums, which have the genuine article in their care, are often hard pressed to adequately maintain themselves.

I doubt if any of us this morning can bring before this committee precise documentation, dollar by dollar, for the case we are making because that kind of documentation is only now beginning to emerge in any sort of useful form. It can be had, nowever, and one way to achieve it would be through a searching study of the physical and financial circumstances of a given number of museums. The number need not be large and it could even be limited to the study of one museum selected at random from each state. From having visited a great many museums in this country I am convinced that the evidence that would come to light through such an effort would be applicable to many and, indeed, perhaps to most of the museums of this country.

Through the efforts of our admirable National Endowment for the Arts a far reaching study which bears heavily on what I have been saying is now achieving final form and should soon be ready for consideration. This study promises to be most helpful to all of us in clarifying many of the heretofore gray areas in regard to the operation of our museums.

What we need to find, if we are to do even a part of that which the public expects of its cultural institutions, is some means of giving them basic assistance. We are fortunate in having now, through the Endowments, a growing and most welcome support for certain areas of our programs and to a degree for conservation and the reinstallation of collections. Through the National Museum Act we are receiving support for projects which, in a basic way, are likely to have a beneficial effect on wide areas of the museum world. But still that broader area of critical concern remains: how can the museums of this country in all their variety cope with the basic problems that confront all of them - those museums that are privately funded, those that operate on state or municipal funds and those that receive support from a combination of sources. If what we do in the way of providing a valid form of

education, not to mention aesthetic pleasure, for a mass public through the presentation of our collections, through exhibitions, through publications, and through public lectures - which, by the way, are given so frequently, and I believe so effectively in our museums for the benefit of a very sizable adult public, that I think we tend to forget just how important an activity they really are - is judged to have real meaning to the people of our country, then we are obliged to look ahead to find some means of getting at the problems that now keep us from doing the best of which I believe we are capable.

I don't think that any of us here today are running away from the need to develop support on the local and state level, and some of us have succeeded in doing just that, but more often than not that support reaches only a certain level and is not sufficient to allow museums to strike at the heart of the matter. We must also recognize that our public is not entirely a local one, as a very large number of our museums attract visitors from all over the country and more frequently, as time goes on, from abroad. Many of our collections, especially those in the larger museums, are not necessarily of local interest as they represent a

national or international heritage and, therefore, can be expected to have a very wide appeal. Therefore, in my view, federal assistance in the form of a Museum Services Act, developing with the full cooperation of our museums, would surely bring about major and lasting improvements by helping us to vastly improve the shell, or framework - that is the museum environment itself - within which we can further develop our services and programs, and in the long run such support could be of enormous assistance in terms of the day-to-day operations of many museums which may be still a long way from the time when local communities will see fit to recognize them as something more than a local attraction which must be content with second or third place in the community.

All of us in the museum field appreciate the attention that you, Senator Pell, and your colleagues in the Senate, and that Congressman Brademas are giving to the plight of the museums of this country. We fully appreciate, also, the remarkable progress that has been made already through the Endowments and the National Museum Act; however, I believe there is room for a far greater and very necessary accomplishment if we are to succeed in our purpose of putting the museums of this country on a firmer foundation than many of them have at the present time.

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